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## TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC. FOR THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 25, 2015

IN SUPPORT OF RAISED H. B. 6384

### AN ACT CONCERNING COLLABORATION BETWEEN BOARDS OF EDUCATION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

Good afternoon Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleishmann and members of the Education Committee. This testimony is being submitted on behalf of Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS). My name is Nieka Thompson and I am an attorney in CLS' children-at-risk unit. Legal services attorneys have been representing low-income families and students across the state on educational issues for over 30 years.

CLS fully support HB 6384, an Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel, because there is a crucial need in Connecticut for (1) improved communication and collaboration between school districts and the police officers stationed within them; (2) written memorandums of agreement (MOAs) between school districts and police departments so that everyone understands the police officer's role and responsibilities; and (3) improved data on arrests of students in school.

The legal services attorneys who practice education law have experience working with school districts across the state. We have witnessed the tremendous variation in roles of police officers in the schools – across towns and even within the same town and same school. Some school resource officers (SROs) have shared with us that they have been told by school administrators to arrest students for loud or disrespectful behavior that otherwise would not have led to a call to the police, but ends in arrest only because the police officer happens to be there. Others have shared with us that they feel their role is to arrest students for "disorderly" behavior.

In July 2013, in response to Waterbury's ranking as the 4<sup>th</sup> highest city in the state for school based arrests, Connecticut Legal Services formed a local collaborative with leaders from the school district, the police department, the judicial branch, CSSD, DCF, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, and Waterbury Youth Services to reduce the arrest numbers. To date, the collaborative has been successful in bringing together the school district and the police department to sign a memorandum of agreement (MOA) which clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of SROs in Waterbury schools. The MOA, developed using OPM's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee's model MOA,



also includes a graduated response model detailing the limited behaviors that warrant SRO involvement. In addition, Waterbury SROs have been trained on effective interactions with youth. Waterbury also implemented restorative justice programs at its middle schools. Currently, Waterbury's collaborative is working on implementing a new diversion protocol which will include a civil citation process in an effort to further reduce arrests. The success of the work done by the collaborative is undeniable: Waterbury's overall school arrest rate is down 38% from the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year according to the Waterbury police department.

Waterbury's accomplishments to date demonstrate the tremendous need for MOAs between schools and police. Without an agreement on roles and responsibilities that includes a graduated sanctions model of intervention, it is impossible to have consistency in interventions within a town or even within a school.

Our work has also demonstrated the need for improved data collection regarding school based arrests. At present, data collection from multiple sources, including the schools, CSSD, police departments, and the State Department of Education, is necessary to obtain an accurate picture of school based arrests in our communities. This data collection is hampered by the lack of a consistent definition of school based arrest and the inconsistent reporting of demographic information. We spent significant time gathering and analyzing data from all these sources in order to determine the total number of school based arrests in our communities, the offenses for which the students were arrested and the demographic information of the affected students. Demographic data is particularly important given that students of color and students with disabilities have disproportionate contact with the juvenile justice system.

In order to promote better communication between police and schools, improve data collection, and reduce ineffective and unnecessary student arrests, we strongly urge the Education Committee to support H.B. 6384, An Act Concerning Collaboration Between Boards of Education and Law Enforcement Personnel. Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Submitted by:

Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.